

THE U.S. — AND ITS TROOPS ABROAD — ARE VULNERABLE TO LOW-FLYING DRONES



APRIL 23, 2024

Last year, Americans watched, transfixed, as a Chinese spy balloon the size of several school buses made its way across the United States before it was shot down by the Air Force off the coast of South Carolina.

This highly public event turned out to be the tip of an increasingly large iceberg. Several more aerial objects have been discovered, and recent reports suggest spy balloons are but a few of thousands of aerial incursions our country has faced. Most involve small pilotless aircraft flying at a very low altitude, sometimes only 100 feet off the ground.

These uncrewed aircraft systems, or UAS, pose multiple challenges: They have interfered with commercial flightpaths and crossed our southern border uncontested. Many have been identified flying over military bases and nuclear facilities, such as Langley Air Force Base in Virginia, Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri and our test ranges in the western United States.

Service members deployed overseas are increasingly facing threats from these uncrewed systems, too. The three American soldiers targeted in an attack in Jordan this January lost their lives to a small Iranian UAS. These systems have become a significant security problem, for which the U.S. military has minimal countermeasures. Iran's attack on Israel this month only underscored the threat.

In classified briefings and open settings, our committee has examined the threat posed by high-altitude craft and low-altitude drones. We discovered a series of underlying issues complicating an effective response to them.

The first problem is that our nation lacks adequate drone detection capability. We still rely on the early warning radars that served us so well during the Cold War. Today, though, they are unable to detect, identify and track small aircraft at both

9/25/24, 5:16 PM

The U.S. — and its troops abroad — are vulnerable to low-flying drones - U.S. Se...

high and low altitudes. Inside the United States, we can hardly track anything other than commercial aircraft. Almost none of our domestic military bases have the sensors to identify small drones.

If we fixed our tracking problem, though, a second issue would arise. U.S. agencies lack clear lines of authority about which agency is responsible for stopping these incursions. Instead, a dizzying maze of overlapping jurisdictions and inflexible bureaucracies confuses, rather than clarifies, crisis response. Government officials from an alphabet soup of agencies — Defense Department, Justice Department, Department of Homeland Security, Federal Aviation Administration — spend hours if not days simply discussing who can take action when a UAS is identified. Too often, low-altitude incursions are treated as a law enforcement matter instead of as a national security issue.

The United States must launch a broad overhaul of its detection capabilities and streamline its ability to respond once a threat is identified. A third step would be to significantly boost our defensive capabilities against hostile UAS at our military bases overseas, nearly all of which lack counter-drone capabilities.

In Congress, we are working with military officials to give service members the detection methods, statutory authorities, and counter-drone tools they need to handle the unique size and volume of small drones.

Recent versions of the National Defense Authorization Act have included protocol reviews, various reforms and some procurement of new counter-drone tools. But no strategies to date have solved this problem in a comprehensive, sustainable fashion.

We need a master plan that crosses all agencies. As Iran's attack on Israel proved, our adversaries see drones as an inexpensive, deadly solution to penetrate the most sophisticated layered air defenses. There is no reason to think the challenge is limited to the skies over Iraq and Israel; it could threaten the United States, and fast. That means U.S. policymakers have no time to spare in generating a better blueprint for defenses against drones.

9/25/24, 5:16 PM

The U.S. — and its troops abroad — are vulnerable to low-flying drones - U.S. Se...

In the meantime, our initial efforts to counter low-altitude drones have turned into an unnecessarily complex problem. At least a half dozen organizations across the Pentagon are developing and fielding counter-drone equipment, and many of these efforts overlap or are at cross-purposes. As we spend time moving in too many directions, our enemies are upgrading their drones, while our own counter-drone equipment remains ineffective. This could soon have deadly implications downrange on the battlefield, or — with the state of our domestic defenses — far closer to home.

It is time to break the bureaucratic logjam and build a full-scale approach to the threat of small drones. Developing these solutions will improve our ability to defend service members and civilians. The growing dangers posed by China, Russia, Iran and North Korea demand much of our defense focus. Nonetheless, we cannot forget that national security begins at home.

Sen. Jack Reed (R.I.) is the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Sen. Roger Wicker (Miss.) is the ranking Republican of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

This op-ed originally appeared in the Washington Post and can be found [here](https://www.wicker.senate.gov/2024/4/the-u-s-and-its-troops-abroad-are-vulnerable-to-low-flying-drones).

Permalink: <https://www.wicker.senate.gov/2024/4/the-u-s-and-its-troops-abroad-are-vulnerable-to-low-flying-drones>